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UNILATERAL FORGIVENESS AND THE TASK OF RECONCILIATION

ABSTRACT. Although forgiveness is often taken to bear a close connection to the value of reconciliation, there is a good deal of scepticism about its role in situations where there is no consensus on the moral complexion of the past and no admission of guilt on the part of the perpetrator. This scepticism is typically rooted in the claims that forgiveness without perpetrator acknowledgement (i) aggravates the risk of recidivism; (ii) yields a substandard and morally compromised form of political accommodation; and (iii) comes across as patronizing and offensive to the recipient, thereby causing further alienation. In this article, my aim is to show, firstly, that none of these arguments is decisive and, secondly, that forgiveness is a suitable object of political concern in the absence of cross-community consensus on the rights and wrongs of a conflict. In this way, I aim to demonstrate that forgiveness deserves to be taken seriously as a means to civic reconciliation in a broader range of situations than many have allowed.

KEY WORDS. Forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, moral disagreement

One of the familiar challenges facing post-conflict societies is to find an effective means of promoting peace and reconciliation. In the aftermath of periods of civil war and ethnic conflict, it is clearly important to try to renew the bonds of trust and co-operation that are needed for a well-functioning civil society. To address this challenge, one option that is sometimes recommended is the promotion of a ‘civil culture’ of forgiveness. Especially in the wake of the South African experience, there is growing support for the view that forgiveness can play a valuable role in the public realm as a means of repairing damaged or broken political relationships (see Digeser 2001; Shriver 1995; Tutu 2000).

However, this view is complicated by the dynamics that typically prevail following periods of ethnic conflict and political violence. Particularly in societies which have been fractured along sectarian or racial lines, such as Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia, there tend to be competing narratives about the past and competing accounts of the rights and wrongs of the conflict, with the result that there is a reluctance on the part of those who are

seen by one side or the other as perpetrators to face up to their guilt and make amends. Although this doesn't necessarily mean that forgiveness should be excluded from such situations, it does raise at least two kinds of question about its suitability as a reconciliatory strategy.

The first kind of question arises from the perspective of the individual victim who is contemplating the possibility of forgiveness. From this standpoint, the fact of moral disagreement is apt to reveal itself in the reluctance of the alleged perpetrator to acknowledge any guilt or to make amends. Due to their competing assessments of the past, the victim may have a lively sense of injustice and injury and yet the perpetrator may deny any imputation of wrongdoing. As such, forgiveness – if it is possible at all – is apt to take the form of a unilateral initiative on the part of the victim which is unprompted by any evidence of perpetrator acknowledgement or repentance, and this raises the question of whether such forgiveness can be effective as a means of renewing civic trust and co-operation. Can so-called 'unilateral' forgiveness *succeed* in promoting civic reconciliation?¹

The second kind of question arises from the perspective of a state seeking to promote a 'civic culture' of forgiveness. Although forgiveness is first and foremost an interpersonal response, it may nonetheless feature as part of a broader institutional strategy for dealing with the past. As a means of promoting peace and reconciliation, a state might encourage its citizens to forgive one another for past transgressions. In this context, the fact of moral disagreement may complicate matters by making it much harder to determine the nature and

¹ Forgiveness is said to be 'unilateral' if it is granted independently of – and prior to – any acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the recipient. See, for instance, Govier (2002), p. 62. Some philosophers tend to use the term 'unconditional forgiveness' to mean much the same thing. However, I prefer to avoid this phrase because it encourages the mistaken thought that the only form of conditionality that might be relevant to the justification of forgiveness is the wrongdoer's attitude towards the offence. It is one of the points of this paper that there are 'forward-looking' conditions that bear on the justification of forgiveness which aren't tied to perpetrator acknowledgement or repentance.

For some general discussions of the ethical status of unilateral forgiveness, see Bennett (2003b), Garrard and McNaughton (2003), Griswold (2007), Haber (1991), Holmgren (1993), Pettigrove (2004) and Watkins (2009).

value of such a strategy. Faced with situations where there is no cross-community agreement on who are the ‘victims’ in a conflict and who are the ‘perpetrators’, what is involved in promoting a civic culture of forgiveness, and is it consistent with values such as liberal neutrality and non-partisanship?

In what follows, I propose to discuss both types of question in light of what I shall call the Repentance Thesis, the view that:

- (1) Forgiveness can only promote a worthwhile and sustainable form of civic reconciliation if there is at least a minimal degree of repentance on the part of recipient.

Many of those who discuss these questions – including those who otherwise take a strongly pro-forgiveness view – insist that forgiveness will only succeed as a reconciliatory strategy if there is a sincere and remorseful admission of guilt on the part of the perpetrator. Trudy Govier, for instance, asserts that ‘[a]cknowledgement of the wrongs of the past is critical in any politically sustainable reconciliation that features forgiveness’ (Govier 2002, p. 145) and Desmond Tutu claims that ‘if the process of forgiveness and healing is to happen and to succeed, ultimately acknowledgement by the culprit is almost indispensable’ (Tutu 2000, p. 218; see also Amstutz 2004, pp. 185-6).

My own view, by contrast, is that this emphasis on perpetrator acknowledgement is overstated. Without denying that factors such as perpetrator acknowledgement and repentance can be a help, part of my aim in this paper is to show that forgiveness can still contribute to the task of civic reconciliation in the absence of a shared account of the rights and wrongs of the past. To this end, I devote the earlier parts of my article to rebutting some of the arguments which are normally enlisted in support of the Repentance Thesis before going on to show that (liberal) states can justifiably seek to cultivate a civic culture of forgiveness in morally divided societies. In this way, I hope to show that forgiveness – at both the individual and the institutional level – deserves to be taken much more seriously as a reconciliatory strategy than many have allowed.

Forgiveness and reconciliation: some definitions

Forgiveness and reconciliation are both complex and contested concepts. Especially in the civic realm, there are plenty of different accounts of their meaning and significance. In the case of reconciliation, probably the most common line of analysis proceeds from the idea of a *political relationship*. In her important and nuanced treatment of the concept, Colleen Murphy, for instance, starts from the claim that ‘political reconciliation broadly refers to the process of rebuilding political relationships’ (Murphy 2010, p. 8; see also Radzik 2009, pp. 80-9).

Of course, as Murphy is the first to admit, this style of analysis needs to be refined and developed in order to mesh with the complexities of the subject-matter. For one thing, reconciliation doesn’t necessarily involve the restoration of the *status quo ante*. In many situations in which reconciliation is discussed, there may not have been any meaningful political relationships in the first place or else the relationships may have been characterized by violence, oppression and injustice. Insofar as reconciliation is understood relationally, it therefore seems more plausible to understand it in terms of *either* the rebuilding *or* the building anew of healthy political relationships following a period of conflict, enmity or estrangement.²

But this raises the further question of what constitutes a healthy political relationship. How should we understand the nature of the relationships that orientate the task of reconciliation? Not surprisingly, perhaps, there are various answers to this question which reflect differing views both about the kinds of relationship that characterize an ideal political community and the kinds of relationship that constitute feasible policy-goals in the aftermath of conflict or mass violence.

² Here I echo Govier (2008), p. 229.

At the more ‘pragmatic’ end of the spectrum is an answer which stresses the idea of a *modus vivendi*.³ This is often taken to constitute a ‘thin’ or ‘minimal’ conception of reconciliation since it is defined primarily in terms of outward behaviour rather than inner thought and feeling.⁴ A *modus vivendi* is achieved when the different factions in a conflict stop fighting for purely strategic, self-interested reasons. It is consistent with a *modus vivendi* that the factions maintain the sectarian, ‘them-and-us’ mentality that fuelled the original conflict. It is consistent, too, with a *modus vivendi* that the factions are prepared to resume hostilities as soon as strategic calculations support doing so.

A somewhat richer conception of healthy political relationships is framed in terms of the idea of social trust. Govier, who develops this account, characterizes trust as the ‘confident expectation that other people in the society (even strangers) will act in a decent and unthreatening way most of the time’ (Govier 2008, p. 235). As Govier points out, social trust is particularly important in the aftermath of conflict since without it the different factions will be unable to work together effectively to further the peace process, develop stable civic institutions and promote economic development. Indeed Govier rightly stresses that ‘[s]ocial trust is basic to the operation of society’ (Govier 2008, p. 235). Healthy political relationships, Govier suggests, are *trusting* relationships. Accordingly, she defines reconciliation as the process of building (or rebuilding) the degree of trust needed ‘for sufficient, sustainable co-operation’ (Govier 2002, p. 144).

Beyond this, there is a still richer conception of reconciliation which draws upon some of the institutional constraints of political liberalism. It is an apparent concomitant of Govier’s trust-based account that political reconciliation could be achieved in a society characterized by fundamental political inequalities. Two people in a hierarchical, feudal society could, in principle, forge a trust-based relationship inasmuch as they could be

³ For an influential specification of the concept of a *modus vivendi*, see Rawls (1993), p. 147.

⁴ The distinction between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ conceptions of reconciliation can be found, for example, in Govier (2002), pp. 141-5, and Crocker (2000), pp. 107-108.

confident that they would perform their allotted civic roles without engaging in violence. To those who favour a more value-laden conception of reconciliation, this conceptual possibility needs to be ruled out. Those who embrace what might be termed the *liberal solidarity model* insist that healthy political relationships presuppose, among other things, the right kind of institutional scaffolding. Darrel Moellendorf, for example, suggests that political reconciliation presupposes ‘juridical equality and a constitutional democratic legal framework’ (Moellendorf 2007, pp. 207-8). He thinks that healthy political relationships (in the sense relevant to reconciliation) cannot exist in a society where some people are treated as second-class citizens and denied a political voice and basic civil rights. This is not to say that he thinks the right kind of institutional order is *sufficient* for political reconciliation. On the liberal solidarity model, there are attitudinal – as well as institutional – dimensions of reconciliation. Apart from a legal structure which adequately recognizes the value of political equality, Moellendorf stresses that the people involved must have the right kind of attitude towards the institutional order and towards one another. They must see the order, not necessarily as ideal in all respects, but at least as crossing a minimum threshold of acceptability, and they must see one another as political equals who are the source of valid political claims.⁵

There are plenty of other accounts of reconciliation, too. Desmond Tutu, for example, tends to characterize reconciliation in terms of social harmony, friendliness and *ubuntu*, by which he means, roughly, an awareness of our common humanity and interdependence (Tutu 2000, p. 35). Nir Eiskovits emphasizes the relevance of *sympathizing* – the process whereby we imaginatively project ourselves into the circumstances in which others find themselves (Eiskovits 2010, p. 10). For present purposes, I don’t propose to suggest that any one of these accounts is uniquely correct. To my mind, different proposals highlight different social

⁵ See Moellendorf (2007), p. 208. Very similar accounts of political reconciliation can be found in Gutmann and Thompson (2000), Bennett (2003a) and Osiel (1999).

and moral goods which may figure in a political relationship, some of which may be combinable, and some of which may have greater significance in some contexts than others.

Nonetheless, it is useful, for the sake of clarity, to have some kind of working definition in mind. Since the arguments which motivate the Repentance Thesis presuppose a conception of reconciliation which goes beyond a *modus vivendi*, and since I don't wish to rebut the Repentance Thesis by simply redefining the terms of the debate, I plan to adopt an account which combines elements of the trust-based and liberal solidarity models. As an admittedly incomplete and abridged account, I propose to understand the task of political reconciliation as the task of building political relationships in the aftermath of a period of conflict, enmity or estrangement, where the relationships that are sought are characterized by non-violence, social trust and liberal solidarity, and are embedded within an institutional order which adequately reflects the values of democracy and equal citizenship.

What about forgiveness? How should this be understood? Probably the most familiar style of analysis focuses on the emotional stance which a victim bears to a perpetrator. There is a widespread tendency to characterize forgiveness in terms of the overcoming of the resentment that is often triggered on receipt of an unjustifiable and inexcusable injury.⁶ However, most of those who favour this style of analysis recognize that not every case of overcoming resentment qualifies as genuine forgiveness. Someone who puts to one side this emotion because they have forgotten about the initial injury isn't forgiving, nor, for that matter, is the person who stops feeling resentful because they no longer view the original injury as blameworthy. To distinguish forgiveness from related phenomena, it is therefore necessary to add some extra qualifications to the basic emphasis on emotional change.

One such qualification concerns the role of belief within the forgiveness process. It seems to be characteristic of those who forgive that they overcome their resentment whilst

⁶ The *locus classicus* of this kind of account is Butler (1958), sermons VIII and IX. The most philosophically developed version is Griswold (2007). Other notable examples include Murphy (1988), Haber (1991), Roberts (1995) and Novitz (1998).

holding on to a clear conviction that they were unjustifiably and inexcusably injured. It is the retention of this ‘cognitive ingredient’ in forgiveness that helps to distinguish it from other responses to wrongdoing, such as *forgetting*, *excusing*, *justifying*, *rationalizing* and *condoning*.

Another qualification concerns the motivation for these adjustments. Forgiveness, as a conceptual matter, seems to be defined by a certain kind of focus on the perpetrator (see Hampton 1988, p. 36, and Allais 2008, pp. 43-4). Someone who says ‘This resentment is bad for my blood pressure. I must get rid of it!’ doesn’t seem to be forgiving, nor does the person who says ‘This resentment I feel for my unfaithful spouse is bad for the children. I must get rid of it!’ What this suggests is that the emotional change which is at the heart of forgiveness cannot come about for wholly self-interested reasons, or for reasons that pertain exclusively to third-parties. Instead it must be motivated by some normatively salient feature of the perpetrator, such as their past suffering, their status as a rational agent, or their moral growth.

A further qualification concerns the range of psychological changes that are involved. Although the overcoming of resentment is normally seen to be important, it is by no means obvious that it is the only kind of adjustment that is relevant to forgiveness. Those who manage to put to one side attitudes such as mistrust, bitterness and hatred all seem to be taking important strides towards forgiveness, as do those who cease to engage in censorious or sanctioning behaviour. This seems to suggest that forgiveness involves a more complex and multi-faceted process than any reference to a singular emotion conveys. To forgive someone – in very general terms – involves ‘drawing a line under the offence’, not in the sense of forgetting or excusing it, but in the sense of discounting it from one’s practical and

emotional orientation towards the perpetrator, putting to one side all of those attitudes and intentions which are founded on the belief that one has been wronged – not just resentment.⁷

Arguments for the Repentance Thesis

With these analytical points in mind, it becomes possible to come to a better understanding of the nature and rationale of the Repentance Thesis. Strictly-speaking, this thesis only entails the negative claim that:

(1a) Forgiveness without at least some minimal degree of repentance on the part of recipient cannot promote a worthwhile and sustainable form of reconciliation.

It doesn't entail the positive claim that:

(1b) Forgiveness with perpetrator repentance *will* promote a worthwhile and sustainable form of reconciliation.

However, most of those who accept the negative claim accept the positive claim too: they believe that there is an asymmetry between the political value of unilateral forgiveness and the political value of what might be termed *bilateral* forgiveness.

In consequence, one way of understanding the Repentance Thesis is by firstly asking how its positive counterpart should be understood. Exactly how is bilateral forgiveness supposed to contribute to the task of reconciliation?

Presumably part of the answer to this question relates to the ways in which the experience of victimization affects people's thought and conduct. It is all-too-common – and perhaps all-too-understandable – for those who have been the victim of inexcusable wrongdoing to feel emotions such as resentment, anger, hatred, mistrust and suspicion, and to

⁷ On my definition, forgiveness in its fullest sense is undeniably a difficult stance to achieve. However, implicit in the definition is a contrast between complete and incomplete forgiveness. A person might be said to have shown forgiveness, albeit to an incomplete degree, if they have taken certain steps towards 'drawing a line under the offence', even if a residue of hostility remains.

A further caveat: the attitudes and intentions that are founded on the belief that one has been *wronged* need not be the same as the attitudes and intentions that are founded on the belief that one has been *harmed*, even though the beliefs may relate to the very same incident. Forgiveness, on my account, typically requires overcoming emotions such as resentment and anger but not emotions such as disappointment and regret.

engage in acts of revenge and retaliation. Insofar as bilateral forgiveness entails the overcoming of these emotions and dispositions, then it removes a significant set of barriers on the road to political reconciliation.

However, there needs to be a certain sense of realism about what bilateral forgiveness can and can't accomplish. There are preconditions of liberal reconciliation which aren't directly in the power of individual victims to satisfy. If a victim inhabits a society in which some people are treated as second-class citizens, then bilateral forgiveness – by itself – is unlikely to rectify the situation. More generally, victims cannot normally address the 'institutional' preconditions of reconciliation, at least not directly; all they can directly address are their own attitudes and intentions in respect of their assailants. But since these attitudes and intentions may have a significant bearing on the prevailing ethos of a post-conflict society, this is not to minimize the role which bilateral forgiveness can play in the task of reconciliation. Bilateral forgiveness, by itself, may not take the parties all the way to a state of complete reconciliation, but it does constitute an important step forward.

This point, moreover, has an important bearing on the interpretation of the negative claim (1a). To the extent that exponents of the Repentance Thesis think that there is an asymmetry between unilateral and bilateral forgiveness, they cannot simply be pointing out that forgiveness without repentance cannot remove all of the barriers to complete reconciliation since this is equally true of forgiveness with repentance. Their point instead must be the stronger one that unilateral forgiveness is a step backwards rather than a step forwards in terms of reconciliation.

This interpretation of (1a) is borne out in the different arguments that motivate the Repentance Thesis. One such argument, which I shall call the *Recidivism Argument*, focuses on the durability of the reconciliation which unilateral forgiveness achieves. It is clearly an important part of the task of civic reconciliation in war-torn societies to achieve a lasting

cessation of hostilities. As a necessary precondition of the ideal of liberal solidarity, it is imperative to ensure that there is no return to the lawlessness of the past. One of the worries that is sometimes expressed about forgiveness without perpetrator acknowledgement is that it doesn't achieve this because it doesn't address the ongoing risk that those who are unrepentant about their past use of violence might be prone to use violence again. Govier, for instance, remarks that '[f]orgiveness that remains purely unilateral has little potential in most political contexts where the failure to acknowledge means the wrongs of the past could be repeated' (Govier 2002, p. 145).

Another argument, which I shall call the *Alienation Argument*, focuses on the way in which forgiveness comes across to the unrepentant perpetrator. There is a concern that unilateral forgiveness will backfire as a reconciliatory strategy because it will seem patronizing and offensive to those who believe they are guilty of nothing. P. E. Digeser, for instance, notes that 'forgiveness without a shared account of responsibility runs the risk of becoming an insult' (Digeser 2001, p. 56). To forgive someone for behaviour they think is justifiable, he argues, is to accuse them 'backhandedly of doing wrong' and to insinuate a moral assessment of the situation which they may resent (Digeser 2001, p. 56; see also Govier 2002, pp. 145-6).

A further argument, which I shall call the *Compromise Argument*, concerns the quality of the reconciliation which unilateral forgiveness brings about. Although reconciliation is normally taken to be a good thing, there is a suspicion that unilateral forgiveness will deliver, at best, a substandard and compromising form of political accommodation. Christopher Bennett, for example, worries that unilateral forgiveness reveals a willingness to renew a relationship on just any terms, rather than on terms of liberal solidarity (Bennett 2003a). He explains:

You may offer gift-like forgiveness to one who has wronged you in your capacity as a private individual. But if this also means that you no longer expect them to repudiate their action

and to express their repudiation through making amends, then you are putting the need to restore your relationship *somehow or other* above the need to restore it adequately. You are practising the Art of Compromise (Bennett 2003a, p. 73).⁸

Together these arguments support the stronger claim that unilateral forgiveness is a retrograde step in terms of reconciliation. They seem to imply that unilateral forgiveness is counterproductive as a way of building healthy political relationships following a period of conflict, enmity or estrangement. Of course this isn't to say that this implication is right. Indeed, at this point, a broader methodological reservation might be entered: it might be suggested that the truth or falsity of the Repentance Thesis isn't strictly-speaking a philosophical matter at all but instead depends on the psychological, sociological and, more generally, empirical data.

At least in one respect, I don't mean to deny this point. I agree that the Repentance Thesis is an *a posteriori* claim about the causal link between one way of dealing with the past (forgiveness) and one kind of political condition (reconciliation). As such, it cannot be divorced from empirical findings. But, in my view, it cannot be divorced from broadly philosophical findings either. As I shall endeavour to show in the next section, the arguments which underpin the Repentance Thesis seem to rest on *a priori* assumptions about – among other things – the kind of relationship it is possible to achieve with an unrepentant perpetrator and the analytic link that exists between the concepts of non-repentance and liability to recidivism. By questioning these assumptions, I intend to undercut the appeal of the Repentance Thesis and to lend support to an altogether different account of the relation between forgiveness and reconciliation which is much more congenial to the role of forgiveness in post-conflict societies.

Beyond the Repentance Thesis

⁸ A similar worry about compromise is in evidence in Minow (1998), p. 16.

At this point, it's useful to imagine a situation where one person's sense of victimization isn't mirrored by another person's acceptance of wrongdoing. To take a simple and schematic example, suppose that person *A* has been injured in a politically-motivated bomb attack orchestrated by person *B*, and imagine that, in the aftermath of the attack, *A* characterizes the bombing as an unjustifiable and inexcusable act of terrorism whereas *B* defends it as a legitimate measure undertaken in the service of a just cause. In reflecting on the plausibility of the Repentance Thesis, it's instructive to consider whether there is any way of filling out the details of the case such that forgiveness doesn't succumb to the arguments just mentioned. Can *A* forgive the unrepentant *B* without aggravating the risk of recidivism, alienating the recipient, or engaging in an unsatisfactory form of compromise?

Consider, first, the Recidivism Argument. Although there are slightly different ways of developing this argument, one familiar formulation emphasizes the positive value of the attitudes and intentions that are given up in the forgiveness process.⁹ There is a view that attitudes such as resentment, anger and mistrust can play a positive role in social life as a means of preventing further offences. Joseph Butler, in his classic treatment of the subject, claims that '[m]en are plainly restrained from injuring their fellow-creatures out of fear of their resentment' (Butler 1958, p. 131) and Nigel Biggar, in his critique of unilateral forgiveness, claims that the 'punitive withholding of trust' can be a stimulus towards moral growth and rehabilitation (Biggar 2008, p. 563). On this line of interpretation, the reason why unilateral forgiveness does little to promote a lasting form of reconciliation is because it

⁹ The other version of the argument emphasizes the message which forgiveness sends to the unrepentant wrongdoer. This seems to be the line of thought that is uppermost in Griswold's mind. Although he recognizes that logically-speaking forgiveness isn't the same as approval or condonation, he worries that this is how it will come across to those who are unrepentant. As he explains (Griswold 2007, pp. 64-5): '[t]he victim may subjectively feel that she is not overlooking the wrong done; but if the forgiveness is unconditional...the offender is very likely to draw the conclusion that her wrongdoing has been condoned.'

I find this unconvincing, at least in many cases. Indeed the force of the Alienation Argument depends precisely on the fact that unrepentant perpetrators generally don't draw the conclusion that their conduct is being condoned: this is why they may find forgiveness insulting.

involves surrendering a valuable stance by which future wrongs might be prevented, thereby aggravating the risk of recidivism.

Stated in this way, it becomes apparent why the argument isn't normally taken to extend to cases where forgiveness is granted to a *repentant* perpetrator. Bilateral forgiveness isn't normally taken to aggravate the risk of recidivism because the repentant perpetrator isn't seen as someone who *requires* the threat of resentment or anger in order to refrain from re-offending. Implicit in the argument is therefore an assumption about the relative worth of the attitudes that are given up in the forgiveness process. It is because these attitudes are seen as necessary in cases where the offender is unrepentant but superfluous in cases where the offender is repentant that there is a perceived asymmetry between unilateral and bilateral forgiveness.

But once this assumption is noted, the argument can be seen to rest on an oversimplification for – even if it is true that emotions such as resentment and anger can exercise a deterrent or reforming effect – there are ways in which a person can be unrepentant about their past conduct and yet be no more at risk of reoffending than their repentant counterpart.

To see this, imagine, firstly, that person *B* no longer has the *capacity* to engage in political violence: perhaps age and infirmity have taken their toll, such that *B* no longer has the physical ability to mount bomb attacks, or perhaps *B*, though still young and healthy, lacks access to the resources or weaponry needed to mount further attacks.

Imagine, too, that *B* no longer has the *moral disposition* to engage in political violence, perhaps because she believes the circumstances no longer warrant it. This kind of possibility is all-too-easy to overlook for it is tempting to think that if someone is unrepentant about an earlier action, they must believe that is acceptable to repeat the action in the future, but this doesn't follow. It is perfectly coherent for a person to believe that it was permissible to

perform an action, ϕ at a time t_1 , but that it is impermissible to ϕ at a later time t_2 . In the present case, B might, for instance, hold that the political grievance that justified the initial bomb attack has been addressed, so that there is no longer any just cause for violence, or else B might believe that she is subject to a special obligation to refrain from using violence which has arisen post- t_1 , perhaps as a result of a promise or peace treaty.

There are, in consequence, a whole host of cases where B can be unrepentant about the bomb attack and yet not be prone to repeat such an attack in the future, and this, in turn, implies that there are a whole range of cases where A can forgive B without worrying too much about the risk of further violence.

The more general point to stress here is that the concepts of *non-repentance* and *liability to recidivism* are logically distinct. The former concerns a person's attitude towards their past behaviour whereas the latter concerns their dispositions in respect of their future behaviour. Those who espouse the Repentance Thesis sometimes move so quickly from the thought that someone is unrepentant to the thought that they pose an ongoing threat to the moral order that they give the impression of overlooking this point. Their mistake, in this respect, seems to be as much conceptual as empirical.

A related response, moreover, is available in relation to the Compromise Argument. To see this, it is useful to consider in greater detail the nature and presuppositions of this argument. At least on Bennett's formulation, two assumptions seem to be paramount. The first assumption is that it isn't possible to achieve an ethos of liberal solidarity with someone who is unrepentant about their past misconduct. Bennett asserts that '[i]n the absence of repentance and atonement the two sides remain, in an important sense, unreconciled' (Bennett 2003a, p. 75). Insofar as B remains stubbornly unrepentant about the bomb attack, then Bennett implies that A and B cannot forge a relationship based around principles of mutual respect and non-violence since B maintains that it is sometimes defensible to use

violence against *A*. The best kind of relationship that *A* and *B* can hope for is a *modus vivendi*.

The second assumption is that unilateral forgiveness does nothing to stimulate the required moral transformation. Assuming for the sake of argument that liberal reconciliation does indeed presuppose repentance, the only way it is possible to be reconciled with someone who is *initially* defiant about their past misconduct is to get them to see the error of their ways. Bennett insists that adopting a ‘hard line’ is essential here. ‘True reconciliation’, he asserts, ‘can only be achieved through punishment’ (Bennett 2003a, p. 68). A ‘forgiving approach’, he thinks, is no help in this regard because it does nothing to challenge, confront, or censure the perpetrator’s unreformed attitudes and beliefs. If *A* were to forgive *B*, then *A* would be drawing a line under the bomb attack and would thereby be acquiescing to a relationship in which she is seen as unworthy of minimally decent (i.e. non-violent) treatment.

Together these two points help to clarify the sense of compromise which is germane to the Compromise Argument. In essence, Bennett’s argument draws on a distinction between ‘more or less adequate civic relationships’, which, in turn, maps onto the distinction between the liberal solidarity model of reconciliation versus a *modus vivendi* (see Bennett 2003a, p. 73). Bennett’s worry about those who accept a policy of unilateral forgiveness is that they seem to resign themselves to the latter rather than taking the steps necessary to bring about the former. Their compromise is the compromise of adopting a substandard form of political accommodation rather than doing what is needed to bring about a fairer, healthier one.

However, once it is noted that a person can change their values over time without repenting them, then this argument, too, can be seen to rest on an oversimplification. The crucial mistake comes in the initial assumption that a reconciliation based on shared liberal values is impossible with someone who is unrepentant about their past misconduct. This

ignores the possibility that a person might be committed to liberal democratic values *going into the future* whilst insisting they were unsuited to the conditions of the past. Imagine, for instance, that *B* says to *A*: ‘As I see it, at the time of the bombing, I was fighting against you and your community, and war is a specific moral condition with its own values and rules. In war, actions that would otherwise be unjustifiable are justifiable and attitudes that would otherwise be inappropriate are appropriate. Given this, I’m not going to repent the stance of hostility I adopted towards you at the time of the attack, but nor am I going to allow this stance to persist into the present. From henceforth, I’m going to see you as a fellow citizen, who should not be subject to violence or non-democratic coercion.’

In this instance, *B* seems to be amenable to a form of reconciliation which goes beyond a *modus vivendi*. Notwithstanding the lack of repentance, *B* is open to a political relationship which isn’t rooted in self-interest or expediency but is affirmed on moral grounds. Were *A* to forgive *B* in such circumstances, there seems to be no question of *A*’s acquiescing to a *modus vivendi* or relationship in which she is seen as unworthy of minimally decent treatment since this is no longer how *B* sees her. The relationship that would result from forgiveness would instead be characterized by a shared commitment to principles of mutual respect and non-violence.

This still leaves the Alienation Argument. This argument focuses on the way in which forgiveness is received by the unrepentant perpetrator. It suggests that the unrepentant perpetrator will take forgiveness as an insult because she won’t accept the negative moral assessment on which it is based. Implicit in this argument, therefore, is the assumption that forgiveness gets *communicated* to the offender. It is only if *B* is told that she is being forgiven that there is a risk that she will find the response patronizing or judgmental.

One quick *a priori* reply to the argument, then, is to deny that forgiveness must take an *articulated* form. It is perfectly possible on my analysis for *A* to forgive *B* without making

this fact publicly known. However, even if forgiveness is articulated, there is a further *a priori* point which blunts the force of the argument. It is an important part of the conceptual structure of forgiveness that it is undertaken for the right kind of reasons. To forgive someone involves drawing a line under their conduct, not for self-interested reasons, but for reasons that are suitably focused on the recipient, such as respect for their rational status or concern for their well-being. Insofar as *B* is aware of this, then, whilst she may not agree with the underlying assessment of her conduct, there is the possibility that she will welcome forgiveness as being undertaken for the best of motives.

Of course, whether this possibility is realized in any given situation still depends on the contingencies of *B*'s personality. There is always a risk that the 'concern and respect' aspect of forgiveness will get spoilt by the fact that it presupposes a negative judgment that *B* doesn't accept. But whether this happens depends, in turn, on the attitude that *B* takes towards the competing assessments of the past. Although *B* doesn't accept that the bomb attack was unjustifiable, she may take various attitudes towards *A*'s belief that it was, ranging from outright incomprehension and disdain through to respect and toleration. If she veers towards the first kind of attitude, then she may respond negatively to forgiveness since her primary thought will be 'What a cheek! I don't need to be forgiven for anything!' But if she veers towards the second kind of attitude, she may respond more favourably since she will acknowledge that serious-minded and reasonable people can have competing moral narratives about the past, including competing assessments of the bomb attack, such that expressions of compassion and respect should be welcomed irrespective of the broader moral narrative on which they are founded.

There are, then, various permutations of the basic example where unilateral forgiveness doesn't succumb to the kinds of objections that are normally canvassed: in these cases, *A* can forgive *B* without aggravating the risk of recidivism, delivering an unacceptable compromise,

or alienating the recipient. To be clear, I am not claiming that every permutation will be like this: if *B* is still prone to violence and hostility, it's hard to see that forgiveness will do much to promote the ideal of liberal solidarity, just as it's hard to see that it will do much to promote the ideal of liberal solidarity if *B* is so uncomprehending towards *A*'s assessment of the past that any offer of forgiveness is taken as an insult. But the important point to stress is that these cases don't comprise the totality of permutations where *B* is unrepentant about the attack.

Once this is noted, then it becomes apparent that the Repentance Thesis misconstrues the relation between forgiveness and reconciliation. It places too much emphasis on the perpetrator's attitude towards the past. This is not to deny that repentance is an ethical good in its own right, nor is it to deny that it often goes hand-in-hand with those factors that are essential to a forgiveness-based reconciliation, but it is to deny that it is one of these factors in itself.

This observation, moreover, paves the way for a more accurate account of the relation between forgiveness and reconciliation. Insofar as there is a relevant form of conditionality, it is best stated, not in terms of (1), but in terms of the altogether different claim that,

(2) Forgiveness can only promote a worthwhile and sustainable form of civic reconciliation if (i) the recipient isn't liable to re-offend; (ii) is committed to liberal democratic values going into the future; and (iii) isn't apt to take the insinuation of wrongdoing as an insult.

Notice that this analysis puts most of the emphasis on the perpetrator's attitude towards the future. What matters to a sustainable forgiveness-based reconciliation, on this view, are the values and dispositions which the perpetrator brings to her subsequent relationships rather than the stance which she takes towards her previous conduct.

Notice, too, that this analysis has an important bearing on the scope of forgiveness in post-conflict societies. Although it substitutes one form of conditionality for another, it would be a mistake to infer from this that it is just as restrictive as the Repentance Thesis. As

a contingent truth, the conditions set out in (2) tend to be more readily satisfied than the conditions satisfied in (1). This can be illustrated anecdotally by an example relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland. In many ways, Northern Ireland is a paradigmatic case study for my purposes since it is a society characterised by deep divisions about the past and ongoing debates about the rights and wrongs of the conflict. The specific example that I want to mention relates to the IRA's bomb attack on the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984, which killed five people and injured a further thirty-one. In the period since the attack, the perpetrator, Patrick Magee, has defended the bombing as a justifiable response to the political circumstances of the time. Although he has expressed regret for the loss of innocent life, he has refused to acknowledge wrongdoing or demonstrate repentance. In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* in 2009, for example, he stated: 'I stand by my actions...I don't understand repentance. I think it has a religious meaning...I made a contribution, why would I ask forgiveness for that' (Brighton bomber Patrick Magee defiant, 2009)?

However, Magee, like many former paramilitaries, is a supporter of the peace process. He was released from prison in 1999 under the Good Friday Agreement only because he was no longer deemed at risk of committing further acts of violence. At a number of speaker events, he has expressed his commitment to the values of mutual respect, tolerance and democratic inclusivity heralded by the Agreement (see Brighton bomber Patrick Magee defiant, 2009). He has also condemned the 'dissident' republicans, who continue to espouse violence, on the grounds that there is an effective political voice for republicanism that was absent in the 1970s and 1980s (see Wilson 2000). Although he doesn't satisfy the conditions laid out in (1), he does therefore seem to satisfy the conditions laid out in (2).

On my hypothesis – but not on the hypothesis captured by the Repentance Thesis – Magee is therefore someone with whom it is possible to achieve a worthwhile and sustainable forgiveness-based reconciliation. Moreover, the subsequent facts seem to bear this out. On

release from prison, Magee was forgiven by a number of those who were affected by the bombing. Harvey Thomas, who was injured in the blast, saw it as his Christian duty to forgive (see Brighton bomb victim, 2001) and Jo Berry, whose father was killed in the attack, shared the platform with Magee at various events designed to promote peace and reconciliation, with the result that an unlikely friendship blossomed (see Berry 2009). In these instances, in spite of Magee's non-repentance, it's hard to see that forgiveness had any of the negative consequences set out in the foregoing arguments: it didn't aggravate the risk of recidivism since Magee no longer posed a risk of violence anyway; it didn't elicit resentment or alienation since Magee was sufficiently respectful towards the variety of moral narratives not to take the insinuation of wrongdoing as an insult; and it didn't lead to a limited *modus vivendi* since the resulting relationships seemed to be based on a shared commitment to building a peaceful and democratic Northern Ireland rather than on narrow sectional interest.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that it is easy – in any categorical sense – to get people to give up violence. As the example of Northern Ireland makes abundantly clear, it can be exceptionally difficult to get people to surrender their arms and to commit to exclusively peaceful means. But my conjecture is that it is even more difficult to secure peace with repentance than peace without it. As Tutu puts it, '[i]t is perhaps the most difficult thing in the world' for us to admit our wrongs (Tutu 2000, p. 217). Although there are various reasons for this, one possible explanation lies in the interconnection between repentance and practical identity. To repent our past behaviour may require us to disown part of our previous moral narrative, whereas to change our values going into the future is consistent with our maintaining the same narrative, but taking it in a new direction. The former seems to be disruptive of our self-image in a way that the latter is not.

Promoting forgiveness: illiberal and partisan?

So far, my argument has focused on reconciliation on the small-scale. The specific examples that I have mentioned concern the quality of the civic relationships that exist between two people. But clearly a state that invokes the ideal of civic reconciliation is going to have its eye on the bigger picture. Particularly in the aftermath of civil war or mass violence, it may be concerned with the totality of civic relationships that exist within a community. As such, it may be reluctant to leave the task of reconciliation to the initiative of private individuals for fear that this will deliver, at best, sporadic and patchy benefits. Instead it may seek to find a more coordinated, institutional strategy of its own.

In this context, my rejection of the Repentance Thesis is relevant. It implies that a state shouldn't exclude the role of forgiveness just because there is a dearth of perpetrator acknowledgement. Notwithstanding the conditions laid out in (2), it should recognize that unilateral forgiveness can sometimes be an effective route to reconciliation. But this still leaves the second question which I mentioned at the outset – the question of whether it is *appropriate* for liberal states to promote a civic culture of forgiveness in the absence of an agreed account of the rights and wrongs of the past. Faced with a situation where there is no cross-community consensus on who wronged whom, is it fitting for liberal states to exhort their citizens to forgiveness?¹⁰

Certainly some commentators are sceptical. Digeser, for example, worries that any attempt to cajole citizens into overcoming their feelings of anger and resentment intrudes too much into their inner mental lives: in his view, it constitutes a problematic form of 'soulcraft' (Digeser 2001, p. 17). Colleen Murphy claims that forgiveness is ill-suited to being an object of political concern because it is the subject of so much ethical controversy. She remarks that '[c]itizens reasonably disagree about the justifiability of forgiving both in

¹⁰ Notwithstanding the shift to the 'large-scale', I am, for present purposes, still thinking of forgiveness as a stance which one person takes up towards another. As such, I am remaining agnostic on the question of whether governments or states can forgive.

general and especially in transitional contexts. State policies designed to encourage victims to forgive fail to acknowledge such disagreement' (Murphy 2010, p. 13). In a related vein, Marius Schoon, whose wife and daughter were killed by the South African security services during the apartheid era, implies that political forgiveness violates the principle of liberal neutrality by showing a commitment to a sectarian vision of the good. In his reflections on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he objected 'bitterly to what he call[ed] the "imposition of a Christian morality of forgiveness"' (quoted in Garton Ash 1997, pp. 33-37).

Together these points challenge the appropriateness of any official attempt to foster a culture of unilateral (or bilateral) forgiveness. However, the force of this challenge cannot be assessed without at least some inkling of the practical form which such an attempt might take. Although there isn't a unique formula for promoting forgiveness, there are a number of broad-brush strategies that might be adopted. Perhaps the most explicit of these is to incorporate the language of forgiveness into the official discourse of a political community. A state, for instance, might recognize forgiveness as a basic constitutional value in much the same way that it might recognize freedom, dignity, or reconciliation as basic constitutional values.¹¹ It might also recommend forgiveness as a policy objective in reports and documents addressing the legacy of a particular conflict.¹² There is also the possibility that it might extol the value of forgiveness through the speeches and public statements of officials, leaders and civic representatives.¹³

Besides these overt ways of promoting forgiveness, a more oblique strategy is to set up civic or legal institutions which are explicitly focused on dealing with the past and which

¹¹ To the best of my knowledge, no existing written constitution makes explicit reference to forgiveness. The 1994 South African constitution treats 'national healing' as a basic value.

¹² In 2006, the UK government established the Consultative Group on the Past to address the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The resulting report placed considerable emphasis on the need for forgiveness. See Consultative Group on the Past (2009), esp. pp. 54-56.

¹³ Famously, Tutu used his position as chair of the TRC to encourage forgiveness.

increase the likelihood of interpersonal forgiveness. At this point, it is worth recalling that forgiveness is intermediate in spirit between forgetfulness and vengefulness. To forgive someone involves holding on to a clear-eyed sense that one was wronged whilst discounting this perception from one's practical and emotional orientation towards the perpetrator. As such, the challenge for a state that is pursuing this strategy is to steer a middle course between promoting a culture of 'national amnesia' and exacerbating the risk of revenge and retaliation.¹⁴ To implement the strategy effectively, the state needs to find an institutional structure which gives victims the opportunity to acknowledge and memorialize their past suffering whilst also promoting the kind of compassion, empathy and understanding needed to blunt the force of hostility, ill will and anger.

In this context, the South African TRC has an important, if ambiguous, status. There is no doubt that the TRC has often been discussed in terms of forgiveness (see Amstutz 2004, pp 201-3; Gutmann and Thompson 2000, pp. 29-33; Kiss 2000, pp. 81-90). It is also true that it catered effectively to the 'acknowledgement and memorialization' dimension of forgiveness. Through its public hearings, it gave victims the opportunity to describe their experiences of abuse, violence and oppression under apartheid. During its proceedings, there were many powerful and moving testimonials. However, it was perhaps more problematic in catering to the 'compassion and empathy' dimension of forgiveness. Although the TRC played host to some remarkable scenes of interpersonal forgiveness, it is questionable whether its institutional design was ideally suited to bringing these about. As Audrey Chapman notes (Chapman 2001, p. 270), the TRC had separate committees dealing with victims and perpetrators: there was the Human Rights Committee, which took evidence from victims, and the Amnesty Committee, which took submissions from perpetrators. This led to a kind of 'institutional' separation of victims and perpetrators which wasn't altogether

¹⁴ Although Tutu has reservations about a policy of 'national amnesia', I borrow the phrase from him. See Tutu (2000), ch. 2.

congenial to promoting the level of sustained interpersonal interaction and dialogue needed for victims to become better acquainted with perpetrators, to understand their motives, and to empathize with their predicament.

Perhaps an institution which is better suited to promoting both aspects of forgiveness is a (certain kind of) restorative justice conference. In a typical restorative justice conference, there is a sustained face-to-face encounter between the offender and victim – sometimes in the presence of family members – where they discuss their respective experiences of the offence.¹⁵ The offender might start by explaining the circumstances and motives which led to the crime before the victim describes the impact of the crime on her psychological, physical and emotional well-being. Through this process, both parties might come to adjust their attitudes towards one another. As a result of hearing the victim's testimony, the perpetrator might come to recognize the gravity of the offence and seek to apologize and make amends whilst the victim, on hearing the perpetrator's testimony, might come to see the perpetrator as a real human being who ought to be shown a modicum of compassion and acceptance.

To be sure, there is no guarantee that these changes will happen in every case. It is a matter of empirical controversy just how effective restorative justice conferences are in promoting forgiveness.¹⁶ There is the possibility that such conferences will sometimes serve to inflame the victim's sense of anger and resentment and harden the perpetrator's sense of defiance and alienation. Nonetheless, restorative justice conferences, and perhaps more contestably truth commissions, do provide an important point of reference in considering how this 'institutional' approach towards forgiveness might be developed. Even if they have their limitations, they exemplify a possible means by which a state might try to increase the likelihood of interpersonal forgiveness.

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of restorative justice and its relation to forgiveness, see Johnstone (2013), pp. 132-5.

¹⁶ For a sceptical discussion of the empirical effectiveness of restorative justice conferences in promoting forgiveness, see Van Stokkom (2008).

However, these institutions are importantly different to the institutions that are germane to a further approach towards promoting forgiveness. In the case of both restorative justice conferences and truth commissions, there is an obvious focus on the past. Insofar as a state enlists one of these institutions to promote forgiveness, it presumably does so in the belief that an official forum in which to discuss past offences can help victims to overcome their feelings of resentment and anger. But a state could take an even more oblique approach towards promoting forgiveness. Instead of establishing institutions which have this backwards-looking orientation, it could set up institutions that are firmly focused on the present but that promote the kind of compassion, empathy and understanding that may lead to less public, less ritualistic scenes of forgiveness.

The kinds of institutions that I have in mind include cross-community arts projects, storytelling initiatives, sports events and social activities. Particularly in the aftermath of civil war or ethnic conflict, one potential source of tension lies in the fact of ongoing geographical and social segregation. Insofar as the two sides tend to live in different areas and rarely associate together, there is a risk that pre-existing grievances will be heightened by mutual suspicion, misunderstanding, and prejudice. By creating the opportunities for cross-community social encounters, a state might therefore hope to counter this risk. Through the establishment of institutions that don't explicitly focus on past wrongdoing but that nonetheless allow victims and perpetrators to come together and to start engaging in ordinary social activities, it might hope to promote the kind of sympathetic, *humanizing* mindset that makes private scenes of interpersonal forgiveness more likely.

Clearly there is much more that needs to be said about this strategy, just as there is much more that needs to be said about the other strategies. Nonetheless, these brief remarks about the practicalities of promoting forgiveness do at least permit a more nuanced response to some of the concerns mentioned earlier. In relation to Digeser's worry about 'soulcraft',

part of the reply must be concessive: there is no denying that forgiveness *could* be promoted in overly intrusive and coercive ways. If a state were to prohibit victims from feeling anger or suspicion, for example, it would be acting in an absurdly unrealistic and illiberal style, just as it would be acting in an absurdly unrealistic and illiberal style if it made an attitude of good will mandatory. But the crucial point to stress here is that a state need not promote forgiveness in these ways. As the foregoing observations make clear, a state could present forgiveness as an abstract value or supererogatory ideal, or else it could set up civic institutions which increase the likelihood of autonomous expressions of forgiveness.¹⁷ If it were to adopt any such strategy, then the only way in which Digeser's criticism could be sustained would be on the assumption that *any* official interest in people's inner mental lives is overly intrusive and illiberal.

Now it so happens that Digeser adopts just such an assumption. He favours what he calls an 'agency conception of politics' (Digeser 2001, p. 17).¹⁸ He believes that the state should focus on the regulation of outward behaviour rather than inner thought and feeling. But, whatever the broader merits of this conception of politics, it is not a conception to which the liberal state need be committed.¹⁹ There is a perfectly coherent strand of liberal theorizing that emphasizes the need for suitable political virtues. Rawls, for example, sees a role for public education in promoting character-traits such as fairness, reasonableness and a willingness to compromise (Rawls 2001, p. 156). Unless Rawls's position is condemned as illiberal and overly intrusive, it seems hard to see why the non-coercive promotion of forgiveness should be condemned as illiberal and overly intrusive.

¹⁷ Here I echo MacLachlan (2012, pp. 48-51), who enlists this point to respond to the 'illiberalism objection'.

¹⁸ Digeser responds to the 'soulcraft' objection by divorcing forgiveness from feelings such as resentment and anger and defining it entirely in terms of outward behaviour. By eschewing a 'sentiment-based' model of forgiveness, he thinks it is possible to sidestep the objection. My own view is that it is possible to sidestep the objection without even redefining the terms.

¹⁹ Nor is it a conception of politics which is in evidence in liberal law-making. By including a '*mens rea*' element in the definition of almost all crimes, liberal states pay some attention to the 'inner' aspects of human existence. On this point, see Pettigrove and Parsons (2010), p. 665.

Of course, at this point, Murphy's worry about moral disagreement might be reiterated. It might be suggested that forgiveness is especially unsuited to the political realm because its ethical value (unlike the ethical value of, say, fairness or reasonableness) is so contested. But, on closer inspection, it's unclear why moral disagreement *per se* should have this implication. After all, there are plenty of matters – such as abortion, the environment, war, genetic engineering, and the treatment of minority cultures – on which citizens reasonably disagree and on which liberal states normally take a stand. Why should forgiveness be an area of disagreement which is excluded from the political realm?

Perhaps what is really troubling Murphy is not so much the fact of moral disagreement *per se* as the fact that, in responding to this disagreement with a pro-forgiveness stance, the state is showing sectarian bias. Understood in this way, Murphy's objection is much the same as Schoon's: the objection is that forgiveness is ill-suited to the political realm because it violates the principle of liberal neutrality.²⁰ But this objection, on further inspection, hardly seems decisive. To be sure, there is the possibility that forgiveness will sometimes be justified in explicitly sectarian terms. If a state were to promote forgiveness as a way of improving the condition of people's souls or making them into better Christians, then it would be disclosing a commitment to a sectarian conception of the good. But there is no need for a state to justify its interest in forgiveness in these terms. Given my wider argument, it is perfectly possible for a state to defend its interest in forgiveness by citing its causal link to the ideal of liberal solidarity: that is to say, it can defend forgiveness as a way of establishing the ethos needed for a stable liberal community. This hardly seems illiberal.

I am therefore sceptical that there is any *general* conflict between state-sponsored forgiveness and the demands of liberalism. However, there is an altogether different challenge which arises, not from the requirements of liberalism, but from the requirements of

²⁰ For a discussion of this principle, see Kymlicka (1989) and Kymlicka (2002), pp 217-219.

non-partisanship. In many post-conflict societies, it is important for the state to remain neutral between competing assessments of the past. In Northern Ireland, for example, the power-sharing government is only likely to retain cross-community support by avoiding a partisan account of the conflict. Were it to embrace the republican view that the IRA was fighting a just war against an illicit colonial occupation, then it would forfeit the support of the unionist community, just as it would forfeit the support of much of the nationalist community were it to hold that the IRA was a terrorist organization wholly bereft of moral or democratic legitimacy. The difficulty in promoting forgiveness in such circumstances is that it seems to be at odds with the requisite kind of moral neutrality. To promote a civic culture of forgiveness, it seems necessary – at least on first inspection – for a state to determine who needs to forgive whom, which, in turn, requires classifying people into ‘innocent’ victims and ‘guilty’ perpetrators, which, in turn, requires making moral judgments about the past.²¹

Admittedly, there may be some judgments that a state can make that are sufficiently uncontroversial not to risk forfeiting political support. There may be certain incidents, such as war crimes or other serious human rights violations, which are so manifestly egregious that no section of the population will take offence at a public declaration of wrongdoing. But, in practice, the number of such uncontested incidents may be relatively small since people often disagree on the proper conduct – as well as the justification – of conflict. In the language of just war theory, there is often a debate about the proper application and interpretation of *jus in bello* norms as well as *jus ad bellum* ones. In Northern Ireland, for example, there is disagreement, not only on whether the IRA was to blame for starting the conflict, but also on whether it was right to adopt the targets and tactics that it did.

²¹ For a related set of observations, see Griswold (2007), p. 139. Griswold thinks that the multiplicity of different perspectives that exist in the public realm casts doubt on the very idea of ‘public’ or ‘political’ forgiveness. Although I don’t have the time to discuss this point adequately, it is interesting to note that it is rooted in the same facts that underpin the charge of partisanship.

The strategy of seeking to found a civic culture of forgiveness on a core of uncontested judgments may therefore have limited potential in deeply divided societies, and this may, in turn, encourage the verdict that forgiveness is unsuited to such conditions: if a society is so thoroughly divided about its past that any attempt to construct an official narrative will only destabilize a peace process, then it might be argued that it is best for a state to encourage its citizens to *forget* their grievances rather than to *forgive* them. Perhaps the best option for reconciliation in conditions of unbridgeable moral disagreement is to follow a policy of national amnesia rather than national forgiveness.

But this conclusion seems to me to undersell forgiveness, not least because it ignores an altogether different response to the challenge of non-partisanship. Instead of seeking to found a civic culture of forgiveness on a core of uncontested moral judgments, a state might seek to promote such a culture without committing itself to any moral judgments at all. To see how this possible, it is instructive to note that the pre-conditions of forgiveness-promotion are distinct from the preconditions of forgiveness itself. Whilst forgiveness requires a belief on the part of the forgiver that a wrong has been done, forgiveness-promotion only requires a belief on the part of the promoter that those who are being encouraged to forgive believe a wrong has been done.

Once this is noted, then it becomes possible to see how a state can encourage forgiveness whilst remaining non-committal about the rights and wrongs of the past. The crucial point to emphasize here is that a state can devolve the relevant moral decision-making to its citizens. Instead of seeking to construct an 'official' list of victims and wrongdoers, it can start from the fact that each citizen may have their own personal assessment of who qualifies as a victim and who qualifies as a wrongdoer. It can then hold that anyone who *self-identifies* as a victim by the lights of their own personal narrative should forgive their perceived assailant. So long as the state doesn't endorse the individual's narrative but simply

takes it to be a psychological or sociological datum that needs to be factored into its policymaking, then it can avoid making any moral judgments about the past at all.

Of course this does raise a further question about the practicalities of such a strategy. A state that is determined to remain loftily non-committal about the rights and wrongs of the past cannot take initiatives that classify some people as official victims and other people as official wrongdoers. In this respect, the creation of South African-style truth commissions or restorative justice conferences may be out of the question, at least insofar as they presuppose the allocation of such roles. But it doesn't follow from this that a non-partisan state can do nothing concrete to foster a civic culture of forgiveness. Rather than adopting the second strategy that I mentioned earlier, it could adopt the third and final strategy instead. It could establish institutions which don't logically presuppose any prior ascription of wrongdoing but which nonetheless promote the kind of compassion and empathy which increases the likelihood of private scenes of interpersonal forgiveness. For example, it could set up cross-community arts and social projects as a way of bringing people together and promoting greater dialogue and respect, or else it might set up 'storytelling initiatives' as a way of allowing former combatants to exchange experiences and come to a more sympathetic understanding of each other's motives. There is no reason to think that such measures require the state to take one side's point of view more seriously than the other's.²²

These measures, moreover, have a virtue that a policy of 'national amnesia' lacks. Notwithstanding their non-partisanship, they show willingness on the part of the state to take seriously the different narratives that exist within a divided society. This is because a strategy of forgiveness-promotion seeks to effect a change in people's attitudes but not a change in their underlying moral beliefs. It tries to get people to overcome their resentment,

²² In recommending this strategy, my position bears some comparison with the approach recommended in Smith (2012), pp. 48-51. However, Smith tends to see this as a non-political, 'bottom up' approach which emerges from the grass roots initiatives of private individuals whereas I see it as an approach that can be orchestrated by the state.

hostility and mistrust whilst allowing them to maintain their conviction that they were wronged. It is therefore consistent with recognizing that a person's sense of the past – including their sense of individual or collective victimhood – may constitute an important part of their cultural and political identity which should not be suppressed or buried. In a very real sense, it respects and accommodates the fact of moral disagreement.

Conclusion

In summary, the moral dynamics which typically prevail in the aftermath of periods of civil war and mass violence don't constitute a decisive challenge to a strategy of forgiveness-promotion. The fact that different people may disagree about who is to blame for what, and who needs to ask for forgiveness from whom, doesn't imply that such a strategy will be ineffective as a route to reconciliation, nor does it mean that it will violate the demands of liberalism or non-partisanship. Together these points add up to a prospectus on the role of forgiveness in politics which owes part of its interest to the relation that it bears to the main alternative. Those who espouse the Repentance Thesis don't necessarily deny that forgiveness can be relevant in divided societies but they typically insist that it needs to be embedded in a broader attempt to construct a shared assessment of the conflict: it is only by getting the different factions to see eye-to-eye on who qualifies as a victim and who qualifies as a wrongdoer that they believe that forgiveness can be enlisted as an effective way of promoting the ethos of liberal solidarity.²³

²³ This kind of view finds expression, for example, in Consultative Group on the Past (2009). This report is unambiguous in its rejection of unilateral forgiveness, insisting that '[i]t is simply not possible to complete an act of forgiveness unless a wrong is acknowledged' (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, p. 54). Instead it places considerable faith in the capacity of the different communities to reach a consensus on the past through a process of dialogue and truth-recovery, stating that, '[a]s cross-community story-telling and other forms of memorialisation proceed, it is quite possible the overall futility of recourse to arms to solve the problems of a divided Northern Ireland might begin to dawn on those who took part' (Consultative Group on the Past 2009, p. 55).

In a sense, the stimulus for my argument is the observation that this kind of agreement is sometimes unobtainable. Regardless of its desirability, there are plenty of situations where no amount of dialogue or political encouragement will lead to a complete consensus on the moral complexion of the conflict. In Northern Ireland, for instance, in spite of some notable examples of contrition,²⁴ the different sections of the community continue to disagree passionately about the defining questions of recent history, including the question of whether the Provisional IRA was right to take up arms against the British state in the late 1960s.²⁵ To endorse the Repentance Thesis is therefore tantamount to excluding forgiveness as a way of dealing with the legacies of the past in many situations where the need for reconciliation is most acute.

My proposal, by contrast, allows that forgiveness can have political value in conditions of persistent and unbridgeable moral disagreement. It implies that a state that is trying to promote reconciliation shouldn't discount a strategy of forgiveness-promotion just because there is no prospect of securing agreement on the rights and wrongs of a conflict. But it doesn't follow from this that such strategy should be adopted in every conceivable post-conflict scenario. In this context, it is worth reiterating my earlier point that there are constraints on an adequate forgiveness-based reconciliation. From an institutional perspective, these constraints have an important bearing on the way in which such a strategy is framed. They imply that a state seeking to promote a civic culture of forgiveness should at the same time seek to ensure that the conditions set out in principle (2) are satisfied. Although such a state shouldn't be fixated on constructing a shared assessment of the conflict, it should – as far as possible – try to ensure that its citizens are committed to exclusively democratic, non-violent means going into the future and aren't so intolerant of

²⁴ The Provisional IRA, for example, issued an apology to all of its 'non-combatant' victims in 2002.

²⁵ I therefore agree with Biggar (2008), p. 568, that '[i]f there is to be any measure of reconciliation in Northern Ireland, it will be the reconciliation of *partisans*. Reconciliation will have to happen between those who continue to disagree about what caused the Troubles and about who is basically to blame for them.'

different judgments about the past that any offer of forgiveness is taken as an insult. By cultivating the right kinds of attitude towards the future and towards the fact of moral disagreement, it can have greater confidence that unilateral forgiveness will be an effective means of promoting reconciliation.

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